Revisiting Christian Soteriology in the Liberation Process of Korean Christianity: An Open Door for Inter-Religious Dialogue

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Abstract

Christian faith is not about protecting the "doctrinal purity of Christian theology." For Koreans, becoming Christian is taking part in the liberating mission of Jesus Christ for their own people in the Korea peninsula, in their own *Korean Christian* ways. For this reason, revisiting Christian soteriology will provide the foundation for Korean Christians to think rigorously about their Christian faith and ethnic identity. In doing so, a door of inter-religious dialogue can also be opened.

Introduction

> Because Christian theology is human speech about God, it is always related to concrete historical situations. To put it another way, theology is inseparable from social existence – James Cone (1976, 17)

One of the important messages that liberation theology teaches is that multilayered human existence begets various shapes and colors of hermeneutical circles in theological discourse. A person's socio-cultural context provides a unique lens through which a person views the world and understands God's will and work. Thus, one's view of liberation is inevitably related to the lens in which many determinants of the person, such as his ethnicity, class, gender, and sexual orientation, are interwoven.

In this paper, from among the many determinants that I have in my hermeneutical circle, I want to focus on my ethnicity, so that I can situate myself as a Korean and examine some meanings of Christian belief for Korean Christians. This paper explores a way in which Korean Christians can be truly liberated, in the sense of not being deprived of their own traditional religiosity, while remaining Christians at the same time. In doing so, I hope to open an avenue for genuine inter-religious dialogue.

In the first section, I will describe the necessity of inculturation for Christianity in the non-Christian world and the ways in which Korean theologians have strived to inculturate Western Christianity into Korean soil. Then I will scrutinize a weakness in the existing Korean inculturation process: an exclusive soteriology that disregards Korean religiosity. I argue that this exclusive soteriology yields the seeds of discrimination and oppression, which prevent the liberation of Korean Christians. In the second section, I will focus more on the problem of exclusive soteriology and the reasons why I believe it causes oppression. In the third section, I will suggest a way in which the exclusive Christian

soteriology can be revised and transformed into a theology that is inclusive and genuinely Christian and Korean at the same time.

Inculturation

I. An indispensable Process for Korean Christians

Even though the fact that I am a Korean is one of the important determinants in my identity formation, my ethnicity had never played a part in my theological questions until I came to study in the United States. Being a minority in this racially and culturally diverse society challenged me to define who I am in terms of my ethnicity.[1]

What is the meaning of being a Korean Christian and studying theology from my own ethnic point of view? With the help of post-colonial theology, I came to realize that I "live in a language that is not my own (Fernandez and Segovia 2006, 29)." Segovia writes,

> [W]e live in a language that is not our own. […] This is a language inherited from Western Christianity and elaborated with reference to Western Christianity. […] It is a language, therefore, in which ethnic-racial minorities and non-Western Christians in general find themselves uprooted or deterritorialized (Ibid.).

The "language," Segovia mentions, includes not only English but also the concepts and ideas that Western theology formulated through its history and tradition. I came to understand that certain ideas and concepts – such as creation, incarnation, and salvation – were not from my own tradition. At that juncture, the Christian beliefs that I had grown up with became foreign and unfamiliar.

New questions came to mind. Where did my Christian belief come from? When did it become my belief? I can only trace the root of my Christian belief to sometime around one hundred and twenty years ago when the first missionary from America came to Korea. My ancestors didn't know Jesus or the God of Christianity. My grandparents were sincere Buddhists. They were wary of Christians because they thought Christians always tried to evangelize people of other religions by threatening them with *heaven and hell*.

After my grandparents passed away, my parents went through conversion experiences and my entire family became Christians. I was only seven at that time and I thought becoming Christian meant becoming more Westernized and, at the same time, a part of a technologically and culturally *advanced* belief system. Many of my friends went to church and became Christian for the same reason. It was definitely a "colonized mindset"[2] that I had in those days. The Western God seemed to be more modern and civilized, and such images made the Christian God more powerful than the gods in our own culture, which were regarded as superstitious, uncivilized, and less powerful.

If my Christian belief originated in a Western context and none of my ancestors knew Jesus and the God of Christianity before the missionaries came, in what ways can I relate my ethnicity to my Christian belief? In what ways can I understand the Western God

as a Korean? In what ways can I comprehend myself and Korean society through the lens of the Western Christian understanding of human beings and the world?

A new set of language is needed in theological discourse. A language is needed in which Koreans can find faces and voices of their own people. A language is needed in which God can be described as the *God of Koreans*. Hence, the inculturation process is indispensable for Korean Christians, whether they live in Korea or in other countries.

II. Means of Inculturation in Korea

Korean theologians have made efforts to indigenize Christianity into the Korean context in two ways: inculturation theology and *minjung* theology. In the 1960s, inculturation theology was developed out of the awareness of Korea's own cultural and religious heritage. Inculturation theologians tried not to follow Western theology, but created Korea's own theological language through Korean cultural-religious heritage. Yoon Sung-Bum mediates Christianity through Confucianism. Yoo Dong-Sik indigenizes Christianity through Shamanism. Pyun Sun-Hwan takes Buddhism into account to explain Christianity in Korea (Suh 1984, 239).

Inculturation theology's significant contribution to Korean theology is its inclusiveness. The Christian beliefs that American missionaries had transferred to Korean Society had, in Aloysius Pieris' term, a *Christ-against- religions* type of approach toward other religions (1988, 61). Cultural inheritance ceased so that a person could become a *faithful* Christian. For instance, ancestor worship, one of the cherished Korean traditions, had to be suspended. Shamanistic and Buddhist gods, as well as other mediums of worship which Koreans had practiced for thousands of years, also had to be abandoned in order to accept Jesus as the savior, and God as *one God*. Now, with this inculturation theology, Koreans could find ways in which they could inculturate Christianity without sacrificing their own cultural and religious tradition.

Despite their endeavor to create a genuine *Korean* Christian theology, these approaches were caught in heated debates among Korean Christians and theologians. Efforts to understand God through the traditional cultural-religious heritage of Korea was denounced as syncretism. The Rev. Pyun Sun-Hwan was evicted from the Korean Methodist conference, after being accused of developing a syncretistic theology. Accordingly, Korean theologians' first attempts to incorporate Korean culture and religiosity into Christian belief were denounced.

In the 1970's, Korean theologians developed another means of inculturation. It was called *minjung* theology. The focus of *minjung* theology was no longer on the cultural-religious heritage but on the socio-political context of Korea. *Minjung*, comprised of two Chinese characters: min jung, which literally mean "the mass of people," represents those "who are oppressed politically, exploited economically, alienated socially, and kept uneducated in cultural and intellectual matters (Moon 1985, 1)." *Minjung* theologians regard those who are oppressed as *minjung* and understand salvation as liberation from various oppressions that *minjung* experience. Korean *minjung* theologians often used an analogy between the Israelites and the Koreans through their common experience of

oppression (Ibid. 3-17). *The God of the oppressed*[3] in this way becomes the God of the oppressed Korean. In so doing, our historical tragedy and experiences of oppression are used as resources in theological discourse.

1970's *minjung* theology is important because it provides precious insights for Koreans about who God is and what God is doing in the socio-historical and political existence of Koreans. However, I see one limitation of *minjung* theology when compared to the inculturation theology of the 1960s. The limitation is *minjung* theology's negation of Korean religiosity. Even though inculturation theology did not receive significant support from other theologians and Christians at that time, inculturation theology contributed to Korean theology by embracing Korean cultural religiosity and being inclusive of other religions. And I think the negation of an ethnic group's own religiosity in the process of inculturation is fundamentally related to colonialism, which is in the long-term a cause of racial and ethnic discrimination. I will delve into these related issues in the second section.

Exclusive Christian Soteriology

I. A Seed of Discrimination

In order to delineate the relatedness between exclusive Christian soteriology and discrimination, I would like to trace back the footsteps of colonization and Christian mission. Charles Long provides guidance in this.[4] When the Christian West found the New World and encountered Indians who had a different mode of religion, the Christians thought that salvation could not be and should not be given to Indians unless they surrendered their *sinful* superstitions to Christianity (Long 1995, 202). Long attributes this attitude to the Protestant theology of salvation, especially Calvin's. The knowledge of God, which they thought was given to every human being by God, is blinded and stifled by sinful superstitions. Therefore, the Puritans could only understand the Indians' ongoing superstitious deeds as an "infallible sign of negative predestination, and the unavoidable damning of the Indian's soul (Ibid)." Long asserts that this *Christ-against-religions* type of soteriology and missions already contained the seeds of racism even though Calvin himself (and the other *sincere* Christians) denounced racism. Salvation and the conditions of salvation seem to give important meanings and values to human lives.

When some behaviors and thoughts are regarded as stumbling blocks to salvation, others inevitably think of the people who do not surrender their *sinful* behaviors or thoughts as damned. When the idea of *pagan contagion* is added to the discourse and when their superstitious deeds and belief are seen as contagious and endangering to the White Christian's soul, the pagan group is devalued and dehumanized (Ibid. 203.) Furthermore, the segregation of the pagans is easily justified and the other group of people who *know the way to heaven* can try to control and instruct the pagans without feeling any guilt because it is *for their (the pagans') own good*. In this way, the exclusive Christian precept of salvation is deeply related to oppression, and especially to racial discrimination.

II. A Call to Liberation Theologies

If the starting point of existing theology is God, liberation theologies start from people's experiences: experiences of being oppressed by sexism, classism, racism, and heterosexism. While investigating these experiences of oppression, liberation theologians delve into the ways in which liberation can be brought to the oppressed people by revisiting concepts and ideas of existing theologies. In this process of liberation, reality is not the universal truth carried throughout the world by Western missionaries. Rather, truth is found from all modes of experience and the expressions of the oppressed throughout the world. Liberation theologies should be receptive to the truth from people of the non-Christian world and hear what God is doing in their history by embracing their culture and religiosity.

For this reason, I think now is the time for theologians who are concerned about the oppressed and their liberation to take the exclusive Christian soteriology into consideration and revise it. In this regards, Kwok Pui-lan gives credit to C. S. Song when he criticizes a negative effect of the prophetic traditions in 'Third-World' theology. Most Asian theologians, according to Kwok, find relevant points from the prophetic tradition. Sometimes, they criticize the corruption of existing religious systems, and at other times, they identify their pluralistic contexts with that of Hebrew prophets. Despite all of the important roles of the prophetic tradition in 'Third-World' theology, the prophetic tradition failed to value the religious symbols and cultures of other religions. Accordingly, "the prophets' negative attitude toward other religions has contributed to the distrust of popular religion and an insensitivity to theological motifs expressed in other religious and cultural idioms" (Kwok 1995, 60-61).

Just as *minjung* theology failed to appreciate Korean cultural-religiosity while focusing on the economic and political situations of Korea, other liberation theologies overlooked the culture and religiosity of the non-Christian world while they were concerned with the socio-political and economic situations in their theology.

III. A Response to the Call: A New Inculturation Theology

One of the ways in which Korean liberation theology can respond to the call to revise exclusive soteriology is by making another attempt to develop an inculturation theology which embraces Korean culture and religiosity. I think that Korean theologians can get some insights from African inculturation theologians who boldly insist that African culture and religiosity is their "God-given heritage." (Martey 1993, 72). Luke Mbefo writes:

> God had spoken to our ancestors before the arrival of Christianity; our ancestors had responded to God's address before the arrival of Christianity. […] The task is to discover how this word was heard and its repercussions in the life of our ancestors. [African] theologians believe that Christianity should continue, through fulfillment, this original Word of God [which had been given to the life of ancestors] (Ibid. 73).

African theologians, in their inculturation process, took their traditional religion, culture and philosophy as one of the sources of their theology. Koreans should similarly use their heritage as sources of theology. As Pieris writes, "in our Asian context, religion is life itself rather than a function of it, being the all-pervasive ethos of human existence (Pieris 1988, 90)." Korean Christianity cannot be developed without the religio-cultural heritage that is within the fabric of our lives and existence.

Until now, Korean culture – and especially our religious culture – was not permitted to become a source of theology. When Korean feminist theologian Chung Hyun Kyung gave her speech at World Council of Churches Assembly in Canberra, Australia in February 1991,[5] most theologians in Korea criticized her action and speech as blasphemy. Her speech started as she took off her shoes and called on all the spirits who had been oppressed in human history: "With humble heart and body, let us listen to the cries of creation and the cries of the Spirit within it." Chung introduced a Korean concept of *han*, which is the feeling of bitterness, anger, resentment, and grief that originates from various forms of oppression. She called on *han*-ridden spirits in human history because she believed that one cannot hear the voice of the Holy Spirit without hearing the cries of these spirits, through which the Holy Spirit has communicated her compassion and wisdom for life. Then she asked listeners to repent as a way of answering the Holy Spirit's calling. Denouncing anthropocentrism and dualism, she brought the concept of *ki* and the image of *kwan in* from Asian traditional philosophy and Buddhism (Hyun Kyung 1991). Most Korean theologians condemned her shamanistic costume, her theological linking of the *han*-spirit with the Holy Spirit, and her Korean traditional shamanistic rituals for calling spirits. After her WCC speech, she suffered furious criticism. Even at present, Chung Hyun Kyung's name is often discussed in connection to the speech.

I see Chung's speech at Canberra as her attempt to initiate a new way of formulating inculturation theology. It is different from the previous version of Korean inculturation theology, which did not include women and other oppressed people – *minjung*. *Minjung* theology failed to value Korean culture, religiosity, and philosophy. Chung believes that God has existed with Koreans throughout their history, even before the Western missionaries came. She envisions our life as our text, in which God's revelation takes place and the Bible and church tradition as the context and reference point for theology (Chung 1990, 111). As Justin Ukpong explains with regard to inculturation, Chung tries to "re-think" and "re-express" the original Christian message in a Korean cultural milieu. In so doing, Koreans can hope for the "integration of faith and culture," from which is born "a new theological reflection that is African [or Korean] and Christian" (Martey 1993, 68).

Before initiating a new inculturation theology, however, Korean Christians need to resolve the fear of losing their Christian identity in the process of inculturation. This fear seems to come from the unique history of Christian missions in Korea.

Pieris analyzes the main causes for the failure of Christian missions: denouncing Asian culture and religiosity and "colonial Christ (Ibid. 59-61)." Pieris writes, " …after four centuries of colonialism, Asia has surrendered only about two percent of its population to Christianity (Ibid. 59)." Ironically, however, these two factors in the failure of missions in Asia (denouncing Asian culture and religiosity and the "colonial Christ") worked differently

in Korea. The Christian mission in Korea was not a failure at all, even with those two negative factors.

As I mentioned before, the Christian belief that American missionaries transferred to Korean Society has a *Christ-against-religions* type of approach toward other religions. Cultural inheritance was forgotten so that a person could become a *faithful* Christian. When Christian missionaries came to Korea, Korea was under Japanese rule, and Korea later endured the Korean War. Colonization (under the name of *civilization*) went hand in hand with Christianization. In this process of colonization and Christianization in Korea, Korean religiosity was disregarded while the colonial Christ was accepted. Ironically, after being deprived of their cultural and religious heritage and suffering under the colonial Christ, the population of Christians in South Korea grew dramatically. They account for more than 50 percent (Protestant: 36.8%; Catholic: 13.7%) of the religious population and almost 30 percent of the entire population (Korea Statistical Information Service 2003).

Due to the successful missions in Korea for the last hundred and twenty years, Korean Christians are inclined to hold onto the old Korean Christianity, which has Westernized images of Jesus, God, and church tradition. In so doing, they hope for an ongoing success in their mission to spread the good news to more people in Korea, as the old Korean Christianity did triumphantly.

In my view, however, this success story for Christian missionaries might not have a victorious ending without an inculturation and revision of the exclusive *Christ-against-religion* type of approaches in the inculturation process. The fear of losing Christian identity should not stand in the way of inculturation any more. Embracing our own ethnic, cultural, and religious heritage will not cause us to lose our Christian identity. "All religious experiences are an inculturated one (Hayes 2006, 58)." As Diana Hayes articulates, Christianity has also been inculturated in history since the first century. Even though Korean Christians did not recognize the influence of Korean religiosity in Korean Christianity, Christianity in Korea has *already* been formulated through its cultural, social, religious and historical experiences. Such an inculturation process is inevitable in people's religious practice even though Christian authorities denounced this inheritance.[6] For instance, early morning prayer, which is a unique tradition of Korean Christians, originated from shamanism.[7]

From now on, the inculturation process should be addressed openly in theological discourse. If symbols, ideas, and concepts of Christianity are not renamed and revisited within this lens of inheritance, Christianity will not become a religion that is truly Korean and Christian at the same time. Christianity will merely remain a foreign religion from the West, which colonizes Koreans' consciousnesses.

Conclusion

"We Asian women theologians must move away from our imposed fear of losing Christian identity" (Chung 1990, 113). Chung encourages Asian women theologians to become braver and to risk "the survival-liberation centered syncretism (Ibid)." To her, syncretism is not a dangerous word that destroys Christian identity and causes confusion

for Christians. Rather, it is a way in which we can be transformed and informed by the wisdom of our own people so that we can really listen to people's cries and answer their cries with healing and comforting power.

Christian faith is not about protecting the "doctrinal purity of Christian theology." For Koreans, becoming Christian is taking part in the liberating mission of Jesus Christ for our own people in the Korea peninsula, in our own *Korean Christian* ways. For this reason, revisiting Christian soteriology will provide the foundation for Korean Christians to think rigorously about their Christian faith and ethnic identity. In doing so, a door of inter-religious dialogue can also be opened.

Notes

[1] Jung Young Lee explains the racial and ethnic situation of Asian Americans in the U.S. and how various determinants of marginality are interconnected. Jung Young Lee, *Marginality* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), pp. 33-35.

[2] This colonized mindset originates from the historical interrelatedness between Christian mission and civilization during colonial period. Kwok Pui-lan delineates those days: "During the heyday of colonialism, European powers and the United States justified occupying other peoples' lands by claiming it was for the natives' own good, since they would be able to hear the Gospel and benefit from education, health care, and other Western cultural products. Spreading the Gospel was an integral part of the civilizing mission…" Kwok Pui-lan, "A Postcolonial Reading: Sexual Morality and National Politics," *Engaging the Bible: Critical Readings from Contemporary Women*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006) p. 23.

[3] The meaning of this term is from James Cone's *God of the Oppressed*, (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1997)

[4] I consulted with Charles H. Long's *Sinification: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Aurora, Colorado: The Davis Group Publishers, 1995). Even though the entire book deals with phenomena and causes of oppression, the final chapter of this book "Chapter12. Freedom, Otherness, and religion: Theologies Opaque" meets with liberation theologies.

[5] An edited version of her speech can be found at http://www.ctausa.org/foundationdocs/foundhyunkyung.html

[6] Choi Jun- Sik, a Korean scholar in religion, insists the strong possibility of the inevitable influence of Shamanism to Christianity. Choi Jun-Sik, *HanKukEui JongKyo, MoonHwaRo IkNeunDa(Korean)*, *Understanding Korean Religion through cultural perspective*, (Seoul:SaGeJeol,1998), pp. 67-72.

[7] *Ibid.*, Korean Christians try to find the origin from Jesus' Morning Prayer or from Rev. Kil Sun-Joo's early Morning Prayer meeting in the 1900s but I think shamanism is a more reasonable explanation.

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